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# FUTURE STABILITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: REALISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM, AND INSTITUTIONALISM

**Maya Swisa**

## INTRODUCTION

After experiencing the devastation of WWI and WWII within Europe's borders, European citizens and statesmen sought a way to prevent war from re-emerging on European soil. As a result, they formed a European community to act as a safeguard against war. As the European Union (EU) developed over the last sixty years, membership has expanded to twenty-seven states and no full-scale war has emerged within EU borders. However, realists argue that states face constant security threats and cannot escape the possibility of war as a result of the security dilemma and the uneven distribution of power in the international system. Thus, the question arises: do EU member states still have the potential to go to war against one another in the future? In this paper, I examine realist, constructivist, and institutionalist perspectives on the issue and assess which theory best explains present stability among EU member states. I do not seek to promote policy prescriptions for the EU. Instead, I simply try to evaluate the different theoretical approaches and consider which approach best explains the probability of maintaining long-standing peace within the EU. Ultimately, I conclude that, despite criticisms of the neo-liberal institutionalist perspective, the theory is most applicable for predicting the future stability in the EU.

I begin this paper with a description of the realist perspective, focusing on John J. Mearsheimer's prediction of the conditions that prevent or enable peace within the EU. I then point out that, in the case of the EU, realism poses several problems: it is pessimistic in nature; it ignores the role of institutional mechanisms and norms; and it only recognizes states as the main actors in influencing the international system. In the following section, I examine the constructivist explanations focusing on the role of norms, identity, and socialization as driving actions in the European Union. I then expand upon a major flaw in constructivist theory: it lacks the ability to explain why agents may or may not be successful in changing norms over time and what makes these norms stick. In the next section, I inspect the neo-liberal institutionalist theory proposed by Bruce Russett, John Oneal, and Michael Berbaum based on the Kantian theory of peace. I show that neo-liberal institutionalist theory poses a problem because it does not address the role of short-term relative gains, which is an impor-

tant component of realist theory. Ultimately, I find that the neo-liberal institutionalist theory best explains future stability in the European Union because it encompasses elements of both realism and institutionalism.

## REALISM

Realism assumes that states are the main actors in the international system. Because states are merely trying to survive in the anarchic system, they will act based on self-interest or *raison d'état* as a guiding principle in their relations with other states (Walt, 1998). According to realism, states are in a constant state of war. The root causes of war and peace stem from the distribution and character of military power (Mearsheimer, 1990). John J. Mearsheimer (1990), a proponent of offensive realism in the neo-realist approach, predicts instability in Europe with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar system. Because the realist paradigm focuses on the virtue of state sovereignty and power, realists do not predict that states will cede sovereignty to a supra-national power and cannot explain the continued existence of the European Union. Because the EU poses somewhat of a conundrum to most realists, so few realists have attempted to apply realist theory to explain EU actions. Accordingly, this paper takes Mearsheimer's offensive realism as representing the overall realist perspective for the future of EU security since Mearsheimer is the only realist who has attempted to apply realism to the case of Europe. Mearsheimer (1990) attributes the relative peace in Europe during the Cold War era to three key factors: "the bipolar distribution of military power on the Continent; the rough military equality between the two states comprising the poles in Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union; and the fact that each superpower was armed with a large nuclear arsenal" (pp. 6-7). Now that these systemic mechanisms are no longer in place, he argues that instability within Europe will increase, and the chances are higher that European states could go to war with one another. While Mearsheimer points to the importance of safeguarding the three systemic mechanisms, he also points to a more minor threat to European stability—hyper-nationalism. Mearsheimer (1990) argues that hyper-nationalism is attributed to the emergence of past wars in Europe and will be a factor in the emergence of future wars.

Bipolarity occurs when the distribution of power in the international system is dominated by two major powers as poles. In contrast, multipolarity involves three or more dominant powers as poles (Mearsheimer, 1990). According to some realists, bipolarity increases stability and peace because there are fewer possible conflict dyads to emerge between competing poles. Additionally, bipolarity makes deterrence more feasible because fewer imbalances in the power structure provide a stronger foundation for deterrence to take place (Mearsheimer, 1990). In order for deterrence to be effective, both sides must have roughly equal capabilities in order to prevent the use of weapons or military forces against one another. Furthermore, within the confines of a bipolar system, "prospects for deterrence are greater because miscalculations of relative power and of opponents' resolve are fewer and less likely" (Mearsheimer, 1990). Therefore, the prediction assumes that if multipolarity should emerge in the international system and include certain EU member states (e.g. Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and possibly Italy (Mearsheimer, 1990)) as poles, the likelihood of war and instability within the EU will be much higher than the Cold War bipolarity. However, some realists say that multipolarity is more stable than bipolarity (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1993). Thus, even within realism there is no consensus on the best system for ensuring stability.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union comprised the two poles. It is important to note that since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has generally been accepted that the present international system is defined by unipolarity, with the United States dominating as the major pole (Wohlforth, 1999). Therefore, the EU member states have neither emerged as poles in a multipolar system, nor witnessed the emergence of a multipolar system since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, there also seems to be a general consensus that the US' dominance in the international system is diminishing and a multipolar international system will soon emerge. Some scholars say that the EU has certain characteristics that define it as a superpower (Moravcsik, 2010) – yet, even in this situation, individual EU member states are not competing against each other for power. Because the international system is very complex, now that the US is no longer regarded as a clear hegemon, some also point to China as a new emerging superpower (Fishman, 2005). Ultimately, Mearsheimer's theory has yet to be put to the test.

Additionally, Mearsheimer (1990) places virtue on nuclear deterrence as the most effective method of deterrence because the costs and risks of nuclear warfare are so obvious and vast. Thus, the idea is that “the more horrible the risk of going to war, the less likely it is to occur” (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 19). If states continue to build up their nuclear capabilities, they reduce the risk of war by increasing the costs of war. However, despite Mearsheimer's prediction, the EU “has identified the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as ‘potentially the greatest threat’ to its security” (Anthony et al., 2010). Therefore, because the EU condemns active pursuit of nuclear proliferation, I doubt that member states will employ nuclear deterrence as a mechanism to ensure peace.

Lastly, Mearsheimer (1990) argues that hyper-nationalism has not been present within the EU during the Cold War era but was a major factor in the eruption of the previous wars in Europe and has the potential to increase its scope in Europe in the future. Hyper-nationalism encompasses the “belief that other nations or nation-states are both inferior and threatening and must therefore be dealt with harshly” (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 21). It would appear that the appearance of hyper-nationalism at the member state level could pose a threat to security within the EU. In a recent speech in Berlin, Herman Von Rompuy (2010), President of the European Council, warned of the potential dangers of nationalism to the European Union. He stated,

“the biggest enemy of Europe is fear. Fear leads to egoism, egoism leads to nationalism, and nationalism leads to war (“le nationalisme, c’est la guerre” (F Mitterand)). Today’s nationalism is often not a feeling of pride of one’s own identity, but a negative feeling of apprehension of others.”

However, while Von Rompuy (2010) maintains that the rise of hyper-nationalist tendencies still remains a significant threat to stability in the European Union, there is little evidence that hyper-nationalist groups take up more than a small minority of citizens within the EU. Thus, the hyper-nationalism is not widespread enough to legitimately threaten peace and stability within the European Union.

### ***Problems with Realism***

There are several problems with realism in terms of its pessimistic nature, its disregard for norms and institutions, and its emphasis on states as the most important actors in the

international system. First, it is important to note that realism reflects worst-case scenario thinking. While an optimist can be defined as “a person who says this is the best of all possible worlds,” (Russett et al., 1990, p. 216) a pessimist can also be defined in the same way. Mearsheimer’s realist solutions qualify as pessimistic. Additionally, many of these solutions, which include nuclear proliferation and bipolarity, work as self-fulfilling prophecies. This relies on the premise that “if we act as though the world is an arena of raw struggle, red in tooth and claw, we can surely make it so” (Russett et al. 1990, p. 216).

Furthermore, realists disregard the role of institutions and ideologies in the international system and instead emphasize that “only the ‘realities’ of power competition matter” (Russett et al. 1990, p. 216). Under this assumption, how states govern themselves and how their adversaries govern themselves does not affect the prospects of avoiding war (Russett et al. 1990, p. 216). However, in looking at the Cold War, differing forms of government and governing ideologies played a huge role in prompting war. Furthermore, the theory does not bestow any importance on the institutions set up by the European Union. Some argue that implementing institutional mechanisms has helped the EU in averting full-scale war since the end of WWII in addition to keeping norms of cooperation and integration in place (Russett et al. 1990).

Much of the realist argument regarding the threat of multipolarity in Europe relies on the assumption that certain European countries like “Germany, France, Britain, and perhaps Italy would assume major power status” (Mearsheimer, 1990, p.7). Although it could be argued that some of those countries are stronger powers because of their advantages in GDP and population size (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010), the EU is designed so that these countries do not receive any preferential treatment of power status. Because of the emphasis on unanimity and compromise within the Council, each member state has an equal say on EU issues for the most part. Furthermore, because of the integration of EU member-states into an inter-governmental organization able to speak with one voice (“Treaty of Lisbon (The treaty at a glance)”), some see the EU emerging as a great power in international politics. This poses a problem to the realist argument, which only recognizes states as legitimate actors.

## **CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Constructivism serves as an umbrella theory for many sub-theories. In general, constructivists tend to be concerned with how international politics are socially constructed (Wendt, 1995). Wendt (1995) states that this construction “involves two basic claims: that the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material (a claim that opposes materialism), and that these structures shape actors’ identities and interests, rather than just their behavior” (pp.71–2). Non-material social factors like ideas, identities, and norms remain the driving forces in determining state actions. However, constructivists argue that norms drive actions and not vice versa. Norms, in effect, constitute actor identities and interests. In this sense, norms do more than simply regulate behavior. They help to establish and define a base for the structural system in place. “For constructivists, agents (states) and structures (global norms) are interacting; they are mutually constituted” (Checkel, 1998, pp. 327–8). The structure of the international system rests on the formation and dispersion of norms.

According to Jeffrey T. Checkel (2001), the social interaction between actors plays a pivotal role in applying constructivist theory to the EU. Social interaction is defined as “a

process during which agent interests, and perhaps identities, change” (p. 220). In looking at the emergence of the EU from a historical perspective, it was founded on the basis of security concerns. The initial creation of the EU signified a shift in security norms. The unification of European countries aimed at “ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighbors, which culminated in the Second World War” (“The History of the European Union”). There was a shift from norms of competition, separation, and heightened state nationalism to norms of cooperation, integration, and peace building. Additionally, through socialization, which is how norms are spread, other norms such as compromise and deliberation have emerged over time, helping to further integration in the EU (Checkel & Moravcsik, 2001).

The initial shift resulted in changing attitudes toward security policy for European states. The security policy changed because “the normative desire to put an end to war provided a motive for experimentation, and over the years, conflict managing strategies have been employed” (Hermann & Brewer, 2004, p. 1). Member states sought peaceful solutions as opposed to war-oriented solutions. Their focus became maintaining friendly relations amongst one another. Peace emerged as a norm crucial to European security. Although it took over fifty years to achieve a common security policy for the EU, member states were able to uphold peace without an official security policy in effect. Furthermore, language and communication have played central roles in maintaining EU peace and cooperation without a hard policy in place. Processes of argumentation and learning characterize the social interaction that occurs within the EU. Similarly, “deliberation may transform the very interests of state agents in supranational settings at the EU level” (Checkel & Moravcsik, 2001, p. 221). Because member states are able to discuss issues in a non-threatening environment, not only do they learn to work together and cooperate, but they also learn more in terms of individual states’ interests and needs.

Whereas realism places an emphasis on material factors and the role of states, constructivism emphasizes the importance of ideational factors. In this case, the initial shift of European security norms led to the gradual emergence of a European identity, which strengthens as European cooperation and integration become more prevalent. Over the years, the member states have continued to establish institutions and laws that push for European integration and unity. Norms of cooperation and common identity have driven EU policy. Because the notion of a European identity became a prominent element of integration, EU policymakers encouraged the removal of state lines to ensure the free movement of people and goods in the Schengen Agreement (“The Schengena area and cooperation”). One could look at the emergence of a common European identity as an integral component in implementing the Schengen Agreement.

Instead of acting as a supra-nationalistic identity to compete with individual state identities, the EU identity works to complement national identities. “People can feel as part of both communities without having to choose a primary identification” (Risse, 2004, p. 248). Furthermore, the EU institutions would not be able to influence European citizens if they did not identify somewhat with the EU as a whole. Thomas Risse (2004) wrote,

Willingness to grant EU authority requires some identification with Europe, but not an identification that actually prioritizes Europe over the nation... the European polity does not require a demos that replaces a national with a European identity, but one in which national and European identities coexist and complement each other (p. 250).

The EU avoids fostering competing national identities, which could lead to hyper-nationalism and war, by utilizing a complementary approach. European citizens do not have to worry about competing with other state nationalities, nor do they have to worry about competition between their own nationality and a single European nationality. This blending of national ties helps to avoid potential conflicting identities and reduce the threat of heightened hyper-nationalism described by realists.

### **Problems with Constructivism**

Even if all Europeans believed war to be obsolete, there is always the possibility that the EU's norms for peace and cooperation could change if they were somehow no longer beneficial to the individual states. Critics argue that constructivism "is not able to explain in a systematic way how social construction actually occurs and why it varies cross-nationally" (Checkel, 1998, p. 339). There is one exception to this criticism—Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) came up with a "life-cycle" methodology to constructivism. Many constructivist theories tend to be context-specific, lacking a theoretical rationalization as to the specific processes under which social construction occurs (Checkel, 1998). The theory does not explain what necessary social mechanisms must be in place in order to maintain EU's norms and identities. Also, it lacks the ability to predict when and how norms will emerge and change. There is no way of knowing if EU's movement towards peace and cooperation is guaranteed to last. Ultimately, constructivism cannot predict peace because the theory is weak in explaining agency – i.e. why agents may or may not be successful in changing norms over time and what makes these norms stick.

### **INSTITUTIONALISM**

While constructivism focuses on the role of norms, ideas, and socialization in driving state actions and realism focuses on building up hard power capabilities and states' distribution of power within the anarchic system, institutionalism focuses on the role that institutions play in affecting states' behavior within the anarchic international system. In recent years, neo-liberal institutionalism has emerged as a practical theory within the realm of institutionalism. Grieco (1988) says that "the new liberal institutionalists basically argue that even if the realists are correct in believing that anarchy constrains the willingness of states to cooperate, states nevertheless can work together and can do so with the aid of international institutions" (p. 486). Based on the idea of the *Kantian Theory of Peace*, Bruce Russett, John Oneal, and Michael Berbaum (2003) have offered a neo-liberal institutionalist theory proposing that democracy, economic interdependence, and international organizations (IOs) are key ingredients for peaceful cooperation. Founder of Kantian theory of peace, Immanuel Kant "suggests that international peace could be established on a foundation of three elements: republican constitutions, "cosmopolitan law" embodied in free trade and economic interdependence, and international law and organizations" (Oneal et al., 2003, p. 372). Oneal et al. (2003) have taken Kant's theory and applied it to the modern international system. For purposes of simplicity, I will refer to Russett, Oneal, and Berbaum's theory as 'triangulating peace.'

The theory not only addresses the components of democratic peace, but it also encompasses a rationalist and neo-liberal perspective. Triangulating peace theory corresponds to neo-liberalism, which argues that "institutions matter because they somehow modify the actions of decision-makers both directly by altering the costs and benefits of actions and by



indirectly modifying goals (of cooperation)” (Niou & Ordeshook, 1991, p. 481–2). States utilize rational self-interest to weigh the costs and benefits of liberalizing trade markets. More benefits lead to economic interdependence. As rational actors, states will cooperate when issues of predictability and absolute gains are addressed. Triangulating peace aims to increase predictability by implementing institutional regulations, which obligate all states to adhere to the same rules. Furthermore, with a reduced probability of the outbreak of war and use of force, states will be more willing to engage in trade with other countries, which also increases elements of predictability. Theory deals with rationalism because in terms of absolute gains, triangulating peace asserts that states are more reluctant to trade with adversaries. They tend to focus on relative gains when dealing with an adversarial party. However, when states trade with cooperative partners, “it is the absolute gains accruing to the trading partners that primarily motivate their behavior... relative gains should rarely impede trade” (Oneal et al., 2003, p. 374). Therefore, in addition to maintaining the underpinnings of democratic peace, the triangulating peace theory takes on a rationalist, neo-liberal perspective.

In triangulating peace, there is a direct relationship between peace and the three components: democracy, IOs, and economic interdependence. The authors analyzed 10,000 cases from 1885–1992 and concluded that if all three factors are increased simultaneously, “the probability of a dispute drops by 71 percent” (Oneal et al. 2003, p. 373). The peace triangle works in a virtuous cycle; democracy affects the triangle in that:

The leaders of democratic states are constrained from resorting to force against other democracies; but democracy, by encouraging individual liberty and responsibility, fosters entrepreneurship and the expansion of commerce beyond a nation’s boundaries. As the economic activities of citizens make countries interdependent, international law and organizations are needed to regulate and facilitate commerce. Thus, there is a logical sequence that links the freedom of citizens in democratic states to expanding commerce over a widening geographical area and the growth of international institutions (Oneal et al., 2003, p. 383).

When a democracy is put into place, conflict is less likely and there is a higher likelihood that citizens will pursue economic interdependence, which eventually requires international law and organizations to smooth the progress of interdependence. Trade and conflict are also similarly interrelated. Entrepreneurs are less willing to engage in economic trade with states that face instability due to conflict. Furthermore, if “the use of force is no longer an issue, then a state’s relative loss will not be turned against the state. Relative gains no longer matter and cooperation becomes feasible” (Oneal et al. 2003, p. 374). Additionally, “militarized disputes, disrupt trade, which is why interdependent states avoid them” (Oneal et al., 2003, p. 388). Therefore, interdependence is less likely during times of conflict. States are more likely to establish interdependence with other states that they have good political relations with.

While states are more willing to enter into a conflict with a trade partner when the potential risks are high and uncertain because they have less to lose, international organizations provide institutional mechanisms like trade agreements, which help establish rule of law to counter variables of uncertainty. Additionally, “democracies and interdependent states may benefit from being able to communicate their preferences by sending costly signals... states joined in well-institutionalized IGOs (inter-governmental organizations) can use those or-



ganizations to exchange information and credibly communicate resolve” (Oneal et al., 2003, p. 382). International organizations facilitate states’ cooperation by effectively communicating their preferences without resorting to military measures. Instead, economic and political diplomatic measures gain importance and credibility.

The EU Copenhagen Criteria follows the triangulating peace model. In order to join the EU, a member state must meet certain criteria in three areas. First, the state must have stable institutions that guarantee democracy along with the rule of law, human rights and respect for protection of minorities. Second, a state must possess a functioning market that can readily be integrated into the EU market and be able to adapt to competitive pressure and market forces within the EU market. Third, under the provision of *acquis communautaire* a state must show its ability to take on the obligations of membership to the European Union, which includes adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union (“Glossary: Accession criteria”). In summary, a state must embody democracy and democratic values, be prepared to integrate into an interdependent economic market, and be willing to take on membership into an international organization—the European Union.

Some may not view the EU as an international organization like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Instead, the EU is a supra-national oriented governing body with hundreds of laws, multiple governing institutions, and too much influence over the member-states and their citizens to simply be categorized as an IO. Despite the laws established under the umbrella of the EU, states still remain sovereign entities with the ability to leave the EU whenever they please (“Treaty of Lisbon (Treaty at a glance)”) although in practice, no state has expressed a serious desire to leave the EU. Furthermore, while the EU does not have a constitution to govern its citizens, EU law takes precedence over national law, and member states have given up sovereignty in a number of policy areas. Thus, member states are bound to the EU in a similar way that citizens are bound to a state. Their obligation to the EU resembles something in between obligation to an IO and obligation to a state. However, the case of the EU can still work as an international organization in the way that Oneal et al. (2003) suppose because regardless of its categorization, member states place more importance on the EU than other IOs.

### ***Problems with Neo-liberal institutionalism***

There are a number of shortcomings with this approach. The theory assumes that states will choose to pursue prosperity over survival. The question of short-term relative gains is glossed over because it loses its importance when factoring in long-term absolute gains. By making this assumption, the theory does not address what will happen if a state does not benefit from economic prosperity in terms of short-term relative gains. The theory supposes that if a state does not benefit from any short-term relative gains, it will be willing to sacrifice these short-term gains for long-term absolute gains. The theory assumes that states choose to pursue long-term prosperity over short-term survival. Realists might not agree with this point because they argue that survival is the basis for states’ rational, self-interested decision-making, which often points to short-term oriented goals. If each member state is competing for security, decision-makers will look at what best serves the state individually, without necessarily considering long-term absolute gains (Mearsheimer, 1990). In this case, if a state no longer benefits from integration, it will remove itself from interdependence and cooperation. However, I believe that in the case of the EU, the benefits of long-term prosperity outweigh

those of short-term gains. While it could also be argued that the institutional mechanisms put in place provide incentives to ensure that the state benefits more from cooperation than individual pursuit, the theory does not specifically address what happens if one state does not benefit from economic prosperity, which Oneal et al. (2003) argue could deter a state from embarking on peaceful relations (Mearsheimer, 1990). It instead assumes that it will not be an issue and a state will take on a mentality where what is best for all is best for the individual.

However, it is important to note that the theory does assume that norms, culture, and historical ties that emerge from establishing democratic institutions, participating in economic interdependence, and maintaining IO membership will feed state preferences toward long-term cooperation. This element reflects the role of constructivism within neo-liberal institutionalism. Furthermore, the neo-liberal institutionalist theory addresses the problem of relative gains by concluding that it is in the rational self-interest of states to participate in economic interdependence and cooperation, despite short-term relative losses. Overall, in the long run, EU member states have benefited in terms of absolute gains compared to their economic positions right after WWII.

### CONCLUSION: NEO-LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM AS THE BEST EXPLANATION

Neo-liberal institutionalism encompasses ideas from both realist and constructivist theories. Like realism, it addresses the role of anarchy in the international system as a driving force for state actions. Additionally, triangulating peace includes a long-term oriented rationalist perspective. Like constructivism, neo-liberal institutionalism also emphasizes the role of norms in maintaining security. While institutions keep the norms in place and remain strong embodiments of norms, they also help ensure that self-interest is safeguarded. In looking at the realist and constructivist theories, each theory alone cannot sufficiently explain stability in the EU. However, realism and constructivism do account for part of the story. While each theory plays a role in triangulating peace, it is the three mechanisms: democracy, economic interdependence, and membership in an international organization that remain most integral to maintaining peaceful cooperation.

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